The Conversion of Constantine and His Christian Sincerity

Andrew Koperski

Constantine's turn to Christ is unquestionably one of the most dramatic conversion tales in Christian history—perhaps second only to Paul's own. But how sincere was his Christianity? Was Constantine taking this new tack for the "right" reasons?

Opinions of Constantine's Christian devotion have varied considerably in the 1700 years since. Many initial assessments, such as that of Eusebius of Caesarea, highly regarded the first Christian emperor. But in less than a century, other historical commentators were not particularly impressed looking back on Constantine's career, such as Jerome of Stridon.

In Lesson 9 of our course "Ancient Christianity," Kenneth Calvert speaks to the dynamics at play in Constantine's conversion, as well as how the Church immediately felt the impact of this first Christian emperor.

For one, pagan persecution of Christians essentially ceased with the ascendancy of Constantine as ruler of the empire in 324. An early decree of Constantine and his co-emperor Licinius not only declared the end of persecution, but also declared a broad right to religious liberty and the right of conscience for *everyone*. While often overlooked because it was eventually overturned by later Christian emperors, this declaration is an important chapter in the history of religious freedom.

Many scholars agree that Constantine's actions often seem to indicate a substantive earnestness, even if his comportment did not always match Christian ideals. For example, in his massive new book, *Christendom*, the respected historian Peter Heather argues Constantine had likely been a Christian for most of his life, but he acknowledged it only *after* he had solidified political power. This and other biographical aspects, such as his often-violent dynastic maneuverings or his toleration and possible encouragement of certain pagan political conventions, may reflect poorly on Constantine's personal Christianity in some eyes.

Conversely, Constantine's meddling in ecclesiastical affairs, such as at the council of Nicaea in 325, appears to have sprung from a genuine belief that God would judge him personally if he, as emperor, let the Church slide into discord. Other scholars have even suggested Constantine had a reasonable grasp of Christian theology because his personal documents reflect substantive knowledge of the Bible.

In the fierce theological disputes that followed Nicaea, Constantine often appears as a figure trying to broker peace, however clumsily or ineffectually. For example, although Athanasius of Alexandria routinely proved to be a lightning rod of controversy and thorn in the imperial side, Constantine showed remarkable restraint in dealing with this bishop. When the incorrigible Athanasius appeared to be guilty of committing certain crimes, an exasperated Constantine merely exiled him to Gaul. An emperor bent on manipulating Christianity toward his own political ends would have shown less patience in these situations; prominent clerics who challenged later imperial courts were often less fortunate.

When evaluating Constantine's religiosity, it is always worth remembering that he was feeling his way through uncharted waters: no one had truly tried to be both a Christian and an emperor at the same time. And while Constantine was perhaps flawed or suboptimal in various respects, the history of Roman Christianity might have taken an uglier turn had a more ruthless, calculating personality taken up the mantle of first Christian emperor and set the model for the subsequent centuries.

Post navigation

Original Link:
https://onlinecoursesblog.hillsdale.edu/the-conversion-of-constantine-and-his-christian-sincerity/